



What Is Intangible Cultural Heritage?





*Photo: Patsy's wool socks for sale, Trout River,
photo courtesy John MacDermid.*



What is Intangible Cultural Heritage?

Intangible Cultural Heritage (*ICH*) or what some call “Living Heritage” encompasses many traditions, practices and customs. These include the stories we tell, the family events we celebrate, our community gatherings, the languages we speak, the songs we sing, knowledge of our natural spaces, our healing traditions, the foods we eat, our holidays, beliefs and cultural practices.

Specific examples of our intangible traditions include - among many other customs, skills and practices - the Christmas mummering traditions, and boat building skills. Our ICH can also include Aboriginal languages and cultural knowledge, our various regional dialects, and the expressive culture, values and beliefs of the diverse cultural groups of Newfoundland and Labrador. Many of us play music or tell stories; some of us know about fishing grounds or berry-picking spots; others know about curing illnesses; some of us play cards or skateboard.

Living, Everyday Traditions

It is not only inherited “old” traditions which comprise ICH but also the contemporary rural and urban customs and traditions practiced by our diverse cultural groups and incorporated into contemporary expression.

Our communities value these everyday traditions, which are learned by doing. They are passed along not only over time from generation to generation, but also shared between groups across space.

Youth and ICH

The provincial ICH strategy recognizes, as a guiding principle, that the inclusion of multiple voices, including those of youth, is important in all work relating to Intangible Cultural Heritage. ICH is kept alive and is relevant to a culture when it is regularly practised, and learned within communities and between generations. One of the key areas we must address as our work with ICH continues is the inclusion of youth in our thinking, planning, and celebration of our living traditions. Communities should attempt to connect cultural leaders with youth and children to ensure the intergenerational sharing of ICH.





Case Study:

The May Bush in Newfoundland

"When I was a primary or elementary school kid at a Catholic school, each May students wore blue ribbons pinned to their clothes in honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Blue ribbons showed up around our neighbourhoods, too, on May bushes – saplings with most of their branches cut off, except for the few left around the top with the ribbons on them. This tradition can be traced back to the ancient Celts, who used maypoles or boughs as part of springtime rituals and to bring good luck, especially for agriculture. The Christian Church adopted May as a month for the devotion of Mary, and the custom appears to have evolved to fit in there. The people I know who still put up May bushes in recent years seem to do it out of a combination of religion and tradition."

- Lara Maynard, Torbay

Safeguarding Our Living Heritage

ICH depends on its basis in communities, and on the continuing activities of those with specific knowledge of traditions, skills and customs within these communities. A four goal approach to the safeguarding and sharing of ICH consists of:

1. Documenting ICH and living traditions in your community;
2. Recognizing and celebrating ICH with festivals and commemorations;
3. Supporting and encouraging the passing on of knowledge and skills; and,
4. Exploring the potential of ICH as a resource for community development



Goal One: Recording Our Living Heritage

Communities decide which traditions they feel are important to document. Sometimes these traditions are threatened; sometimes particular elders or tradition-bearers will be highlighted. Other communities may choose to record ongoing and important traditions of everyday life. Identifying and documenting ICH is an important part of maintaining tradition. Information in the form of photographs, journals and other manuscripts, and audio or video of interviews, performances and demonstrations could form an ICH collection for a community.

Goal Two: Celebrating Our Living Heritage

One of the primary ways the public is made aware of ICH and its importance to the culture of Newfoundland and Labrador is through the formal recognition and celebration of our cultural practices. Festivals throughout the province are encouraged to include local community performers, those who know about their heritage, and those who live their traditions. Other ways to celebrate ICH could be to include tradition-bearers as speakers and leaders in school and community programs. Towns and organizations can recognize ICH in their commemorative activities and awards ceremonies, to encourage ICH tradition-bearers to continue their work and to show that it is valued.



*Photo: Docudance performer Louise Moyes,
photo by Justin Hall.*



Goal Three: Keeping Traditions Alive

Intangible Cultural Heritage is kept alive and relevant to a culture if it is regularly practised and shared among groups and between generations. It is not static, but ever changing, and constantly evolving. Each successive generation puts its own stamp on what came before. Communities can encourage discussion to identify ways to keep cultural practices relevant and to pass them on to succeeding generations. Some ideas could include developing programs that match elders with youth, or exploring opportunities for traditional artists to provide workshops, classes and demonstrations on traditional skills.

Goal Four: Living Traditions in Sustainable Communities

Newfoundland and Labrador has long been building cultural businesses based on aspects of our intangible heritage. Traditional crafts such as hooked mats, tea dolls, carvings, knitted goods, and boots and slippers made from animal skins are on display in heritage and craft shops all over the province. ICH-based businesses might focus on food products, publications, or learning vacations. Traditional music is the backbone of the province's music industry. Heritage theatre presentations and "Times" interpreting our history and incorporating traditional forms of music and dance abound. The most successful of these enterprises have involved the whole community.



Photo: William (Bill) McNamara playing accordion at the Port Union Registered Heritage District plaque unveiling, photo courtesy HFNL.



Where do we start?

- Compile a list of traditions and customs in your community;
- Identify the tradition-bearers and elders in your area;
- Think about what traditions, customs or knowledge are under the greatest pressure or threat;
- Celebrate and include ICH at a local festival or gathering; or,
- Request an ICH workshop from the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Online Resources

Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador
www.heritagenl.ca

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (**UNESCO**) ICH Website
www.unesco.org/culture/ich

Memorial University Folklore Department
www.mun.ca/folklore

Digital Archives Initiative
collections.mun.ca



Photos: Top: Labrador caribou skin work, photo courtesy Department of Tourism, Culture and Recreation / Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Program; Bottom: Young janneys, Christmas in Mainbrook, photo courtesy Hoodie Rowlings.

Our Mission

The Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador (HFNL) was established in 1984 to preserve the architectural heritage of the province. In 2008, HFNL was the organization chosen to lead and implement the province's Intangible Cultural Heritage Strategy, available online on our website.

Our mission is to safeguard and sustain the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Newfoundland and Labrador for present and future generations everywhere, as a vital part of the identities of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, and as a valuable collection of unique knowledge and customs. This will be achieved through policies that support initiatives that will celebrate, record, disseminate and promote our living heritage and help to build bridges between diverse cultural groups within and outside Newfoundland and Labrador.



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